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If Not Now, Probably Never.

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-SIX FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y.

If Not Now, Probably Never.

DEDICATED TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

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"If he only would, what pleasure I should take in doing as other women of apparently less means do! Ever so little would enable me to do something!"

Many times before had she thus bewailed her financial destitution; and as many times had it been her excuse for no part in the woman's church work where direct money contributions were required.

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store and get what is wanted and have it charged,' while John insists on paying the bills. That's the way he was brought up. That's the way it was between his father and mother, and he clings to the old fashioned notion of the man spending all the money. That may all have been well enough forty years ago, but it isn't so pleasant now when so much more is expected of women. I'd like to go this afternoon, but I will not without an offering. I suppose I could coax a dollar out of John, but what woman with any pride likes to do that, though I do bring myself to it sometimes for something extra I want very much."

"But," she went on, as she turned from the window, back into her pretty rooms, "I suppose I should not complain of John. Aside from this one matter, he is kindness itself to me. He provides a good home, and likes to see me and the children well dressed, and a better table than he furnishes no one need ask for. And it isn't as if he were not liberal towards the church; he really does give enough for both of us—at least it seems so to him—and then there are so many others who do give, that what I might give will not be missed."

Welcoming this soothing reflection, this lady of seemingly circumscribed ability sat down by her sewing machine, expecting to dismiss missionary affairs, which were not to be thus easily dismissed.

In a moment the door bell rang and the

maid announced Mrs. Darley. She had called to ask Mrs. Aubrel to go to the church with her.

When the caller was again alone in the street and Mrs. Aubrel again at her sewing, the latter said to herself, "I'd rather not go with that dear woman of all others, and take no offering. It always mortifies me when I think what she—a widow, with three children to bring up—manages to do for church work. No masculine pocket there, willing or unwilling, from which to expect supplies, yet she always has something to give when called on. She spins and weaves, as it were, for her tabernacle furnishings—not exactly purple and fine linen and goat's hair, like the willing hearted women of old. Instead of distaff and loom she has substituted the spoon and the pot, and furnishes most delicious home made candy.

"I have sometimes thought of earning church money that way, too," she proceeded, after a moment, "only it might look like infringing on Mrs. Darley's ground, though she has told me she could sell twice as much as she has time to make."

The clatter and hum of the machine, as it ran the length of a delicate tuck, dissipated that thought. However, it was closely followed by another, concerning a certain Mrs. Bond.

"There's another woman who manifests her

faith by works, and in spite of no end of obstacles," began this mental comment. "My! my! wouldn't I a thousand times rather be John's wife, with no money to spend myself, or even have to earn part of my living and all I gave away, as Mrs. Darley does, than be tied to that old Bond for a single day! Never a penny would the church get from his home if he could help it. But Mrs. Bond just will do something for it herself—and she is training those children to follow in her footsteps. She doesn't intend to have a repetition of that father's niggardliness in them. She's bringing them up on the tenth system, for one thing. And the pennies are so few and far between with the little things that they have to keep a book account of every cent they get, lest the count be lost before the tenth one arrives. And when it does come, it goes into a bag all its own—from whence it is only taken out for some benevolent purpose. That seems to me like straining a theory, good though it may be, but she insists there's nothing like training, and that such training will crop out in after life, will or nill. And actually she has worked the scheme up so that the children really enjoy it. For her benevolent work she secures funds by her fine bread, white and brown. And so long as she furnishes her own material and does her baking with the same fire that cooks his food, her husband can't prevent her doing that much towards the support of church work."

A rather unwelcome thought—suggestive of bread making on her part—here dared to creep into Mrs. Aubrel's mind, only to be immediately suppressed by the modest assurance that she never could venture to offer her bread for sale. She had depended upon help so long that she really could not make a good loaf of bread. "Besides," she thought on, "it might look like a reflection on John for me to do such a thing. I am sure he would not like to have me do it."

The first completed cluster of tucks turned Mrs. Aubrel's attention to the idea of fine sewing, in which she was an acknowledged expert.

"I might," she reflected, "at least earn missionary money that way. I have friends who would jump at the chance to put fine work into my hands. Embroidery doesn't pay any more, or I'd certainly try that; but for fine sewing, especially when done with the needle, there is great demand—and it pays so well that I would not need to do so very much of it in order to take a modest part in about all our woman's church work."

For a moment it looked as if the burden was about to be lifted from Mrs. Aubrel's soul, for her heart really inclined to this method—for a moment only, however, for there quickly followed these killing objections:

"I do not know, though, that it would be well for me to attempt any more sewing. I am

pretty sure I do all that is good for me now. It takes so much time to keep two children nicely dressed and to keep my own clothes up to date—that is, as I like to see them. I really fear I must give that idea the go-by."

The second cluster of tucks—twelve deep—was well under way when Mrs. Aubrel's mind wandered out to two of the humbler ones of the parish.

"They tell me," her thought ran, "that little hunchback Molly Faine gave five dollars last year, earned by taking babies out for airings, by caring for them when their mothers were unusually busy, and by doing errands. Seems to me she needed that money herself. And Rachel Martin set her mark as high as ten dollars, and reached it, though she earns most of her living at odd jobs. But she has no aspirations beyond a calico dress to keep company with her best bonnet—the antiquity of which makes one certain that it and that of Madam Noah, of Ark fame, must have passed the salutations of the day with each other."

Facetious Mrs. Aubrel knew as little of noble Rachel Martin's aspirations and longings as she did of the cheerful self-denial that materialized in calico dresses, and bonnets that usually served several seasons that her Lord's kingdom might grow at home and abroad.

"All sorts of ways for getting hold of your mite!" she continued, "but none just suited to your humble servant. Oh! if I only had a

little money of my own! if I only had been born with some gift—song or music! Oh! that I held a powerful pen, from the point of which would flow romance, or drop poetic gems! or that I could paint divine little ideals! If there was but a Woman s Exchange in town! I can make cake and salads that fairly melt in one's mouth. There would be my forte were there but some convenient way of selling such things." Had she forgotten that Mrs. Darley and Mrs. Bond had found convenient ways for themselves?

After this absurd drop from "divine little ideals" to cake, ever so etherial, various other modes for aiding the church and its outside work wafted through her fertile brain, but unfortunately for the cause, come what would, there was, as hitherto, always attached to each method suggested some reason that unfitted it for her use, and when other reasons failed, it was behind John's broad shoulders that she found her excuse; finally the subject was driven from her mind by the merry entrance from school, of her two little daughters, so daintily kept that they might have served as fashion models.

About two year's later an important change took place in Mrs. Aubrel's circumstances; and, alas! as so often happens, the glad came by means of the sad. By the death of a bachelor brother she found herself possessed—not of great wealth—but of very comfortable means

of her own. Mr. Aubrel was perfectly just to her. Even as he had insisted upon the handling of his own money as he saw fit, he did not now interfere with his wife's rights in that which she had inherited from her own kin. His advice and business experience were at her command, but she was at liberty to do as she chose with her own income.

Then it was that Christian work professedly dear to her, that hitherto she had felt obliged to pass by with good wishes only, pleaded for the more substantial aid it now had a right to expect. But selfish desires were ahead of benevolence—desires so gigantic that they left no room for the consideration for what then seemed lesser things; desires right in themselves until they became absorbingly selfish. And the Lord's work was bidden wait a little longer—only a little longer—just till the house was made over and enlarged.

For all at once the good home John had provided, and that her taste had made one of the prettiest in town, ceased to satisfy, and was to be remodelled and modernized. When done it certainly was a thing of beauty, and a joy to her heart as well as the envy of many—but the cost had far exceeded the sum originally allotted to the making over, for though self-denial did sometimes make widespread suggestions self was ever on hand to urge its rights to extra touches of beauty, in the way of effective bits of decorations and ornamentations.

Then, of course, there must be refurnishing; that also brought with it bills that laid claim to much succeeding income, and the Lord's work was again pushed into the background.

As time passed and the habiliments of mourning were laid aside, they were succeeded by a more costly wardrobe than had ever before decked her comely person, that she might be in accord with her home and its embellishments. But why try to tell how one thing led to another? of entertainments lavish and costly, of summer outings and winter city innings—of all that can so easily fill a selfish life, and drain an unconsecrated purse, while the Lord's work is nearly if not quite forgotten.

But will she never fulfill her promise to it? Is the little while of postponement not yet over? I can only answer that she surely has drifted a long way off from any offering of first fruits; what may come I cannot say, but I will whisper my suspicions to you, suspicions grounded on close observation.

Inasmuch as in the days of her entire dependence upon her husband for financial support she did not contrive to surmount the obstacles that dependence put in her way and do her proper share for the church and its connections, in all probability she now will never meet this obligation and do her duty, for selfishness has weakened her and blinded her—weakened her power of self-denial, and blinded her to duty. Pride, too, is playing its part.

What once she might have given she now knows to be a gift too niggardly for one of her ability, and the larger offering she should make she will not—lest it prevent her own selfish purposes; and lastly, time has shaped the habits of her life, and her training has all been towards self—never away from it; therefore what can we expect?

Wait not for convenient modes and seasons. They seldom come only as we, ourselves, bring them. Obstacles lie along all paths—in some more than in our own. Let our offerings to God be out of our immediate resources—resources born of our ability—be it great or small; for only of such as we have are we asked to give.

M. L. THORNTON WILDER.

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